

"Every moron makes sense to himself. The good communicator makes sense to the other guy"

That's a quasi-quote from a show I just saw on educational TV-- one episode of a series about the English language. (I curse the fact that I haven't seen any other episodes.) Personally I don't guarantee that even I will understand what I want to say here because I am thinking and composing in the stick--as much for myself as anybody else. But I figured as long as I was going to do all this thinking, why let it go to waste? Why not make a Lilapazine out of it? So:

As a would-be professional writer, many's the Wednesday nite I sit here watching I SPY and groaning to myself "How can a person put something like that onto paper" (that being some particularly witty or intense or valid bit of dialogue between Culp and Cosby, delivered with audio and visual flair, with excellent camera work and perhaps just the right touch of background music). As a writer (a term I will use and hope you'll bear with), my only tools are alphabetically-represented words and the grammar pertaining to them (such as it is). (My publisher has the additional semi-tools of type-face and cover drawing, but that's another subject.)

Well, here I am with words. And in hopes of communicating, I want to use the word word in a narrow and specific sense here--namely the printed word and/or its spoken reproduction, separate and apart from tonal quality. Okay? In writing, I often find that I can only approximate what I want to say. The lecturer on the ed TV show just made me to verbalize the subtly-suspected reason why. Namely, fellows, our written language is barely adequate for indicating our audio-visual language.

During the course of my archaeological studies (Stephen E Pickering is a sociologist: I am an archeologist) I used to give a lot of thought to the problem of those languages which, in written form, only represented consonants or similiar abstracted pieces of spoken words. (I'm lousy at languages--got no natural aptitude for it at all). Anyway, this lecturer suddenly made me consciously aware of what a small part of our audio-visual speech the printed word represents. Except in the special notations that only specialists read, we have almost no non-word symbols to represent intonation which (as the lecturer pointed out) is an important part of our "grammar". Glancing over the keyboard, I see only two: ? and !. And neither of those is really that specific. (oops, make that three. The underline/ital is an intonation symbol of sorts. I suppose the dash--and the ellipse... are, too. Anybody contribute any more?) Well, anyway, that's a scanty lot of symbols to cover a vast body of intonation.

So an important part of the writer's craft is to be able to choose the word(s) that will convey, or at least suggest, the intonation and/or its connotations. Perhaps an adverb, perhaps a character's gesture, perhaps a bit of the stage-setting or a

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prop (i.e., by reference to the subdued surroundings, one might imply a subdued tone of voice, or the like).

The lecturer listed three divisions in primary communication: (1) speech (i.e., what I've been calling words; (2) para-speech (that is all the non-word noises, the groans, grunts, titters and moans as well as the intonations, and (3) Kinesics (sp? bad reception), which includes the grimaces and the hand-signals and all that. A writer of fiction can convey the first directly. He has to suggest the second and may describe the third. It is two and three that give dimension to one.

As to what we think of as grammar, English is primarily a distributive language. The meaning of a word in use depends to a very great extent on its environment--not only intonation, but also its position, its relationship to the words around it. Words, in a bunch, interact with each other. They can change, lose and/or acquire meanings from their surroundings.

In THE MIRACLE OF LANGUAGE Charlton Laird points out very nicely that what we think of as "grammar" in the formal school-book sense, is a pretty poor and misshapen excuse for an explanation of our language. He states that historically, our rules of grammar are an attempt to squeeze the mishmash of spoken English into the rules of formalized written Latin, and she don't fit too good. Attempts to pound these rules into the heads of students, and attempts on the part of students to make usage fit the rules has often resulted in some strange problems. Refusal to end a sentence with a word that is commonly labelled a preposition can cause really rough problems. However, in recent years the professional word-users (creators of books, radio shows, tv shows, etc) have become more and more lax about adherence to the rules. I hear sentences on TV frequently that would have been grounds for someone's dismissal in the Old Days of Radio. Newscasters (reputedly well-educated people) use phrases like "between you and I", "everybody did it themselves" etc., without blinking an eye. Some of these things bug me, though I'm sure I unconsciously commit just as many sins against the book of rules myself. (Since I refute the validity of the book, I can't very well condemn its transgressors as much as I'd like to, anyway.)

Well, I'm not really building up to some acute and inspired Point here. I'm just blathering away for my own edification. As an aspiring writer, I think the tools a I use, namely words and their arrangement, are a fit subject for thought. As a psuedo-archaeologist, I'm just plain curious.

Hoping you are the same,

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P.S., If you already knew all this already,  
foosh to you.